

How Swede it is: Learning from Sweden's perspective on children [SE] ^[1]

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Source: Today's Parent

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Jun 2005

AVAILABILITY

See text below for excerpts. Full article available in the July 2005 issue of Today's Parent and online at the magazine's website.

Excerpts from the article: The roots of this child-as-citizen view go back to the 1930s when there was a broader movement to build a new Sweden — folkhemmet (people's home) it was called, a society for the benefit of all people, not just the upper classes. Part of this movement was a campaign for children's rights, championed by Astrid Lindgren, legendary author of the Pippi Longstocking stories. She believed and preached that children had the right to be treated the way adults expect to be treated — with consideration and respect. These beliefs — one of Lindgren's passions was children's right to play — not only permeated her stories, which were peppered with feisty independent characters like Pippi. Eventually her ideas came to be part of the Swedish national psyche, not to mention its laws and state policies. Like Sweden, Canada signed on to the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. But unlike us, Sweden paid more than lip service by appointing a children's ombudsman. The Barnombudsmannen (barn means children) does not investigate individual complaints, but rather promotes the rights and interests of children as outlined in the convention. The current ombudsman, Lena Nyberg, frequently talks to panels of children, asking them things like how satisfied they are with their lives. Last year Nyberg published a report on how children felt about the sex education they get; it will be used to improve policy and practice. Canadian child care advocates often cite studies showing that public money invested in quality child care will yield more productive adults. In Sweden, child care (preschool, they call it) seems more about providing a good experience for kids rather than a good future outcome. I visited two Swedish preschools, both impressive. One was actually embedded within a science centre, named Tom Tits Experiment after a children's story. Why child care in a science centre? Essentially, I was told, it fit with the centre's mission, which is to turn kids on to science. Before the science centre opens to the public at 10 a.m., the preschoolers sometimes get to run around in this wonderful facility where there is virtually nothing that a child can't touch. In a room of exhibits about the workings of the human body, I watched a two-year-old boy play with a model of a woman's torso which had a pull-out womb showing stages of fetal development. This little guy was taking the fetuses in and out as if they were dolls. The museum educator mostly just let the kids explore, but once in a while you'd see a group clustered around her while she explained something — a teachable moment. The other preschool, Förskolan Fröhuset (huset means house), is big — 110 kids. Each age group has its own self-contained three-room section, with oodles of space, new and impressive equipment and that Ikea showroom look — spacious simplicity in white and blond wood. Again, little things caught my eye. Each section has its own kitchen area, just for activities like crafts. The meals are prepared elsewhere. Other striking features about the centres I visited include the toilets (three different little-kid sizes), and the tables and chairs used for activities. The tables are at adult height and the children sit on raised chairs. This is easier on the teachers' backs (well, duh), and I heard that some educators feel it's more like the real world for kids. I can't tell how or even whether the Swedish approach to children translates into measurably better lives for Swedish families. On the other hand, I don't need any study to convince me that treating my fellow citizens well is preferable to treating them badly. I think we could learn and borrow much more from Sweden. - reprinted from Today's Parent

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